Journey Toward a Route in Common

Bashir Abu-Manneh

***Route 181: Fragments of a Journey in Palestine-Israel*, directed by Michel Khleifi and Eyal Sivan (2003).**

In "the Israeli-Palestinian conflict," reality is inverted by image and media representation. Occupation is a "cycle of violence," occupied territories are "disputed areas," redeployment is "withdrawal" and "peace" is collective punishment, house demolitions, mounting death tolls, roadblocks and walls. The injury of occupation is rendered equal to the injury of decolonization and hugely destructive state terror equal to individual acts of impotence and desperation. An antagonistic, colonial relationship is passed off as a symmetrical conflict between two equal parties. The colonized are thus presented as responsible for the continuation and consolidation of the occupation. It is the Palestinians who are at fault for what Israel is doing to them; it is they who are in fact the cause of colonialism. This ultimate inversion of reality becomes the justification for further repression.

How can one reverse the inversion, and surpass the vortex of cycles and symmetries? For renowned Palestinian director Michel Khleifi and Israeli director Eyal Sivan, the answer is radically simple: you uncover roots and causes, and rediscover the capacity of ordinary people for change. As ordinary people voice their own memories, contradictory beliefs and contrasting opinions in Khleifi and Sivan's masterful *Route 181: Fragments of a Journey in Palestine-Israel*, the historical truth of Palestine-Israel is gradually revealed like never before in a documentary film. This process captures one sense of the journey in the film's title: a journey through the present to a still active, still determining past. Hence, Khleifi and Sivan adopt the virtual partition line of UN Resolution 181 of 1947 as a route of travel. The other sense of journeying is equally crucial, for both the directors' cinematic project and their project of critique. Journeying means the act of contributing to a collective effort of change and transformation in the future.

Khleifi and Sivan record on film their search for elements of future society already immanent in the present. Their sole political claim is that only through a joint journey of discovery and exposition—a route in common—can those elements of the future be found. The logic of the film is, therefore, essentially emancipatory. Khleifi and Sivan travel back through the present to a repressed and fragmented past only in order to be propelled forward again to a potential future. This double register of past and future is also evident on the level of cinematic form. As the directors drive northward away from each roadside encounter, they focus the camera on a side mirror of the vehicle, giving the sense that the past is always present, always haunting. Their point of departure is always seen to be slowly receding.

Such preoccupations are common to the previous cinematic work of both directors. From *Fertile Memory* (1980) to *Forbidden Marriages in the Holy Land* (1997), Khleifi has uniquely revealed the human condition of Palestine by capturing the actuality and history of Palestinian dispossession and struggle. Sivan's documentaries, most notably *Izkor, Slaves of Memory* (1991), have charted the way in which the past continues to structure Israeli social and political realities in the present. *Route 181* brings together two deeply committed and profoundly humanist directors in an ambitious undertaking to comprehend the most enduring injustice of twentieth-century colonial history: the establishment of the state of Israel.

Shot over two months in the summer of 2002, *Route 181* is divided into three parts: the South, from the port city of Ashdod to the frontiers of the Gaza Strip; the Center, from the Jewish-Arab city of Lyd/Lod to Jerusalem; and the North, from Rosh Ha'ayn, near the new "separation barrier," to the Lebanese border. The rhythm of journeying and exploration is maintained from beginning to end: travel is interrupted by stopovers and chance interviews with ordinary Israelis and Palestinians. The probing directors excavate the depth and width of the conflict: partition, 1948, refugees, peace, old villages, new settlements, expulsion, immigration, frontiers, borders and the occupation. The film remains engrossing throughout its four-and a-half-hour duration—quite a feat.

The directors set off on *Route 181* from a building site in Ashdod. The sky is torn apart by twin Apache helicopters as Khleifi and Sivan begin their interviews with two Israeli foremen and two Palestinian land surveyors, both Israeli citizens. Since two Chinese workers are also on the site, the conversation turns to the policy of closure and denial of entry into Israel for Palestinian workers living in the Occupied Territories. It was "easier" to work with Palestinians, the directors are assured. Palestinians worked for lower wages and were not provided with transport, health care or dormitories. Were Palestinians better workers than the Chinese? The Israeli foreman, a Kurd,

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comments: "We always say a good Arab is a dead Arab." Arabs have failed to learn the lesson of history, he continues. They lost all the wars and will always be the vanquished. One of the directors asks whether it isn't hard for him to say that Arabs are "animals." The foreman replies: "It's the truth. What can I do?" Such racist sentiments run deep, the film suggests. Racism has also played a dominant role in the past, as is made apparent by the directors' search for the lost village of Nabi Yunis, depopulated and destroyed in 1948. A history of violence, dispossession and expulsion is also recounted by the two Palestinian land surveyors from 'Aylabun, now in Israel. One of them, who says that Israeli military culture "makes you a man," casually mentions that he is planning to emigrate to the US. "I have no place here, that's the problem," he says in Hebrew, before completing the thought in Arabic: "I can't realize my ambition." A sense of accumulated injury from discrimination builds from the beginning of *Route 181*.

Tens of encounters like these punctuate the film with striking contrasts. There is the contrast between the elderly Palestinian resident of Masmiya, a village almost completely depopulated in 1948, and the aged Yemeni Jewish owner of a nearby kiosk who believes, as per the slogan on a commonly seen roadside poster, that "Transfer = Peace + Security." The only other surviving Masmiya resident, the old woman's son, tells the directors: "I have no Jewish friends anymore...because basically they don't treat us like human beings." He is bitter, but not surprised, since he has come to understand the relationship between Israelis and Palestinians as one between occupiers and occupied. Segregation is rife, and the logic of racial separation is dominant. As one resident of Kibbutz Nir Oz, near Gaza, affirms: "South Africa is the model.... The fence is the symbol. The fence is Zionism."

Taken together, such statements reveal the extent of Israeli self-consciousness about the nature of the Zionist colonial project. Two more episodes from the Center will suffice. The manager of the Jewish National Fund at Hulda/Huldeh endorses former Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin's wish that Gaza be "engulfed by the sea" and states forthrightly that Israel should have followed the US example and annihilated the indigenous population. "One lot would be gone and couldn't complain, and the other—us—would be living in peace." A son of Holocaust survivors, who describes himself as "a pure product of Zionism," believes that the expulsion and dispossession of Palestinians in 1948 is "no problem at all." "My conscience is clear," he says. The refugees from Europe have merely replaced the refugees expelled from Palestine.

This colonial logic of replacement dominates the Center of *Route 181*. In the opening sequence, scenes of an immigration absorption ceremony in Lyd/Lod are followed by discussions of evicting Palestinian residents and demolishing their illegally built homes, shot at a meeting of the local municipality. The only Palestinian council member is constantly shouted at and interrupted when he tries to speak in opposition to the policy. Only at the end does he get a word in edgewise: "Ensuring that Arabs can't build legally, and demanding that they don't build is unrealistic." Under such circumstances, "ghetto" again becomes a Palestinian word. As the Arab residents of Lyd testify, the word was also used by the Israelis to designate the remaining Arab quarters of the town after the expulsion in 1948. Here, *Route 181* suggests, we are at the heart of the Palestinian tragedy: while Jewish immigrants are welcomed, Palestinian residents are hounded from their homes. Lyd comes to symbolize not only the intensifying inequalities of today but also the degradation of the past. In this regard, we see a Palestinian barber's powerful account of massacres, rapes and expulsions, and also two testimonies from the North never seen before on film. An ex-Haganah soldier in the Galilee recounts his participation in the expulsion of northern villagers, and a Moroccan Jewish Agency official remembers sadly how she illegally smuggled Moroccan Jews into Palestine. Both "operations," it turns out, had the same name: *matate* (broom, in Hebrew). Palestinians swept out, Arab Jews swept in.

Yet, as is exhibited throughout *Route 181*, Zionism has never gone unchallenged by either Palestinians or Israelis. Take the roadside kiosk owner at Gan Yavneh/Barkaa who thinks that the right of return for Palestinian refugees is reasonable and just. Or the demonstrators from Ta'ayyush [Living Together] who protest house demolitions in Lod. Or the Palestinians of Abu Dis near Jerusalem, on whose bulldozed house is spray-painted "They Won't Destroy Our Determination." The Abu Dis residents affirm: "We'd rather die than leave or be thrown onto buses and expelled. The events of 1948 and 1967 won't be repeated." Or, finally, the people of Beit Jala who break both curfew and closure to celebrate a wedding. Such acts of resilience go against the grain of the logic of displacement and dispossession. For Khleifi and Sivan, these are the necessary elements for a future in common; indeed, such acts are what the future is made of. This vision is clearly evoked at the end of *Route 181* in the North. One of the most moving sequences in the film takes place with a Mizrahi couple in the northern town of Shefer. Even after 50 years in Israel, the directors are informed, the husband's dream is to retire in Morocco. Life in today's Israel is simply unsatisfactory. For his Tunisian wife, who lost a son in the invasion of Lebanon, Israel lacks *joie de vivre*: "Here, even if you have it all, you have nothing." Still, she remains certain that peace can be achieved, in a future modeled on the past: "Jews and Arabs together, like in Tunisia."

The testimonies in *Route 181* reveal an understanding of Zionism as destruction of actual and potential coexistence. Opposing such a vision are voices of togetherness and union. For Khleifi and Sivan, commonality, equality and mutuality are Zionism's irreconcilable enemies, and real peace is a future in which human dignity is safeguarded for all. As for the present, the film's ending affirms, borders rule, and maybe even dead ends. *Route 181* intervenes in favor of rediscovering the praxis of self-emancipation: only when we realize that the world is ours to change are we able to shape the future. On our journey there, *Route 181* will surely educate, inspire and empower. ■